



Laurel Brusseau, at right, is one of the art instructors at classes held in Walhalla's Gorge Art Gallery.

## Local artists uncovering Walhalla's secrets

By Tessa Sandstrom  
Clearwater Communiations

Tucked away in North Dakota's northeast corner, Walhalla sits quietly amid rambling hills and the meandering Pembina River. Apart from snowmobile, outdoor and wildlife enthusiasts, Walhalla is hidden from the regular tourists who flock to North Dakota's lakes or Badlands during the summer months. Yet, Walhalla's history of settlers and explorers goes further back, and the scenic beauty of the Pembina Gorge is rivaled by few other locales. Walhalla is one of North Dakota's best kept secrets.

But this secret has one of its own, one that many of its long-time residents don't even know. Amid the abundance of trees and hills suitable for all kinds of outdoor opportunities, the citizens of Walhalla are just beginning to discover the abundance of another natural resource – its local talented artists. This is one secret, however, that the city of Walhalla wants out in the open.

This was first revealed when Walhalla took part in the North Dakota State University Extension Service's pilot program, Building Community Vitality through the Arts. Walhalla already had an arts base with its local arts group, the Brush Bunch, and the Frost

Fire Theatre. But the NDSU program would soon show Walhalla how deep its arts resources really went.

"Until we took part in that program, none of us really realized just how wide the arts talent was in the community," says Liann Zeller, director of the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce. "It isn't just artists; there are dancers and singers and we discovered we have an awful lot to offer in arts and heritage." And what was once just a presence in the community has now become a force.

Since Walhalla hosted the NDSU program, the city has excavated its cultural and artistic resources through arts festivals, art lessons and the renovation of the old city theater. The city has also opened a gallery where its arts are on display and for sale. In cooperation with the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce, local artists opened the Gorge Art Gallery in November 2005. From wood carvings, to paintings and photographs, to jewelry and handmade journals, the gallery offers a place for artists to put their arts and crafts on display – and to sell for profit. It also offers visitors and local residents the chance to buy something unique and made in North Dakota. People young and old are discovering they, too, can turn a hobby into a profit. And this

discovery is further encouraged by art classes that the city's core group of artists tries to hold each month.

Laurel Brusseau is a member of the Gorge Art Gallery, the Brush Bunch and the Heritage Council. An oil painter, Brusseau is also one of the teachers for the art classes. "We've had a beading class, a craft class, and we're trying to get it organized so we have one a month. We're trying to incorporate and include all ages," says Brusseau.

For Bill Zeller, president of the local Arts Council, this is one of the goals of the program. He hopes these art classes will help bring people together and create relationships between young and old. "It's brought our young and old together more," says Bill.

Apart from art classes, the community has been involved in several other activities that seek to incorporate the arts. One important upcoming event is the Arts Festival scheduled for July 14. The festival will not only bring young and old together, but will also help share other cultures. This year's festival is going to focus on Native American arts and crafts, primarily that of the Metis. "We're going to incorporate *all* cultures in this festival," says Helen Volk-Schill, the NDSU Extension agent for community economic development and leadership



in Pembina County. “But we’re going to have a special focus on the Metis, because we have quite a few members in the area.”

Plans for the festival are still under-way, but the busy artists of Walhalla will have yet another project to look forward to. The Arts and Heritage Council recently acquired the Walla Theater, and renovation will begin soon. Arts and Heritage Council members know they have a long road ahead of them in getting the theater into shape, but the work is not about to stop them from accomplishing their goals. Once complete, the city will have a place to hold concerts, plays and other special events. “The school doesn’t have a stage, so it will be able to use the theater for its events and we would also like to open it up to the community for a musical or play once a year,” says Liann. “We also have a local gospel theater group we would like to have in there.”

The theater would only add to the many activities already taking place in the community, including the annual summer performances at the Frost Fire Theatre located in the scenic Pembina River Gorge. From the end of June to the beginning of August, performances by a group of professionals who auditioned for the play perform every Saturday and Sunday. This year’s performance is *All Shook Up*, a musical about a young girl with dreams of hitting the road and a guitar-playing young man who brings rock and roll

to her Midwestern town. All the songs in the musical are Elvis Presley tunes that, according to Frost Fire, “kickstarts a hip-swivelin’, lip-curlin’ musical which will have you jumping out of your blue suede shoes.”

Many local artists have helped with the musical in the past with painting scenes and other activities, but many more residents in Walhalla are finding their own way to express themselves. From book clubs, art classes and festivals, to wine and cheese testing, sidewalk chalk contests and cultural discussions through the newspaper columns, “A Brush with the Bunch,” and “Gorge Ramblings and Theater Thoughts,” Walhalla is well on its way to uncovering its hidden artists. In the end, many artists hope the name Walhalla will become synonymous with the arts and an example of what other small North Dakota communities can do.

“I’d like to see other area artists bring in their work to sell – not just the locals, but all North Dakotans,” says Walhalla artist Leona Schneider. “There are a lot of artists we don’t know about, and this is the place to bring your art. We have people with talents, and we need to share that.”

Walhalla seems like the right



Photo courtesy of Helen Volk-Schill

Once renovations are complete, the Walla Theater will be a center for the area’s art events.

place to uncover more of North Dakota’s artists. “Art is becoming important to Walhalla just because our area is different. It’s special. It’s not like the rest of North Dakota. We are North Dakota’s best-kept secret,” says Brusseau. “Because of that, we have a real possibility for tourism, and if we can incorporate the arts and heritage, it can really help bring people to the community.”

Of course this would mean revealing North Dakota’s best-kept secret to the world. Yet, for the artists of Walhalla, this is a secret they don’t mind sharing.

*The Gorge Art Gallery is located in the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce building at 1105 Central Avenue in Walhalla. The gallery is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. During the summer, the gallery will be open during the Farmers’ Markets, which take place on Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon. Business hours during the summer will also be extended for other special events taking place in town. Contact the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce for more information on arts activities in the area at 701-549-3939 or e-mail [walchmbr@utma.com](mailto:walchmbr@utma.com).*

*The North Dakota Council on the arts supports Walhalla arts programs through artists in residencies, special projects and community arts access grants. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support communities across the state, call 701-328-7590 or visit its website at [www.nd.gov/arts](http://www.nd.gov/arts).*



Photo courtesy of Helen Volk-Schill

The Gorge Art Gallery and the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce share a downtown building.